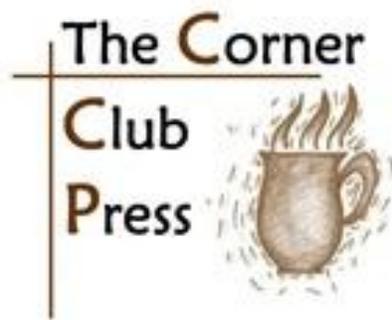


The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction
Converge





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Founder and Managing Editor

Amber Forbes

Co-Founder

Daphne Maysonet

Executive Editor

Mariah Wilson

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the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Letter from the Managing Editor

Dear readers,

Your managing editor has been very busy with a lot of pre-release stuff for *When Stars Die*, which is coming out October 22nd. I have even had to go so far as to make Mariah Wilson, the executive editor, my assistant, just so I could get things done, including this issue. She has done a tremendous job of helping me out, including going through a great deal of the fiction and poetry pieces that have come our way, contacting people to get me interviews and book reviews, among a myriad of other things. Without her, this issue probably wouldn't even be coming to existence at this time. It would...eventually.

I have also recently taken on the title of Webmaster for Augusta State University's literary magazine, Sand Hills. This means I'll be creating a new website--based off a template--for them, and I will be able to help choose the fiction pieces that get published in the issue. So while The Corner Club Press may never go beyond what it is now, it will always be around, no matter what I have going on in my life--or what Mariah has going on in her life.

Last, I would like to mention that Mariah and I are ravenously seeking paranormal pieces for a special paranormal issue that we'd like to do in honor of *When Stars Die*. So if you have any paranormal pieces, feel free to submit them to us. Because it is a themed issue, we are willing to do more editing than usual to ensure this issue comes to life.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Founder and Managing Editor

Mariah Wilson

Mariah E. Wilson (Executive Editor): born, raised and still residing in Quesnel, BC, Canada. Mariah is a stay-at-home mom to three lovely children. She is also a published poet and an aspiring author who is currently working toward the final draft of her novel, *Unbroken*. She is writing a second novel and has a basket full of other writing projects on the go at all times. When she's not busy with kids or writing, she enjoys reading, crocheting and bike riding.



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Our Truth



Peycho Kanev

We are born in this world

And learn to hold our little space that allows us to live

Not because of the humanity,

But in spite of it.

Train to Gainesville



Holly Day

It's very hard to cut yourself on a moving train
without doing real damage. Even though the shocks

on most city express trains are pretty decent, there's still flotsam on the
tracks,

bits of broken concrete, dead cats and dogs

bumps in the road that cause the cars to sway just enough
to turn what should have been a single straight, hairline crack, just enough

to let out the pressure

into a crazy spurting hole that looks like the result of a back alley knife
fight

a mugging gone horribly wrong. You have to choose your canvas

carefully, the tough skin on the top of your leg
the area right above where your shoe ends, some place

easily hidden. The inside of your thigh, that long, white stretch of

inviting flesh

is not a good place to cut on a train, it's too soft, goes too fast

too messy and prone to accidental rending. That's the spot you save
for home, with the lights down low, no curious onlookers trying to decipher

what you're doing with your hands underneath your open notebook.

Echoing Hells



Valentina Cano

Today reminds me of a succession of teachers,
each running into the other,
cruelty written on cells
that would not be defined by any board.
Reminds me of the sweaty hands
reaching out for me and my things.
My heart scratching at my chest,
talons ready to crush through.
To leap forward and take blood.

Brain



John Grey

Your brain grapples with steel girders,
glides hot between iron and steel;
your brain lets down ropes
for me to grasp;
I'm holding on,
hear your winches creak
from hauling me;

your brain suffers from
closeness to the sky,
paints it a dark color;
it needs me up there,
lightening the somber,
getting it back to blue;

but your brain totters
on the narrow walkways
of your high tower;
any moment now,
it topples
and I'm far from reaching

your dizzy-aired level;

yes there's lots of eye-rolling,

lip trembling,

hand-sweating,

shakes and shivers

when we two get together;

your brain holds on enough

to leave me dangling;

Frayed



Carol Phillips

Alicia woke to sunlight in her eyes. The rays beaming through the open window, brought with them the fragrance of a dozen different flowers.

Beside Alicia lay her best friend, Courtney, snoring and stirring gently. Courtney's black hair was fanned out beneath her head on the white pillow, her brown skin oily from the night. Both girls were fourteen but Courtney was much smaller than Alicia; so much so people often mistook the girl for only eleven. They fit together in the bed comfortably and slept that way when Courtney stayed over.

She was the only one who stayed over anymore.

The late spring air had been warm the night before, but had chilled after the girls fell asleep. Alicia slid out of bed to close the window. As she gripped the sill, the sound of grunting caught her attention and she cast her gaze down into the backyard.

Below her, in the garden, her father was digging a hole in the small patch of lawn where nothing had yet been planted. Yesterday that patch had been green with lush grass; now it was a brown gash in the face of the earth. Her father's brown hair was cropped short and matted with sweat. He wore a green sweatshirt as he worked, scooping, scooping, shoveling. She saw the steam rise from his mouth as he heaved, breathing out ragged breath in the cool morning air.

The hole was surrounded by a ring of roses, red and white and yellow, orchids of white and violet and pink, lilacs, daisies, rhododendron, begonias and a white carpet of cottony tufts from the dogwoods spreading over the lawn. Such a

beautiful enclave of nature; seemed a shame to Alicia that a man had intruded upon the loveliness of the garden and ripped open a wound in the middle of it. Alicia leaned out the window, allowing her long corn-colored hair to drift in the cool spring breeze. "What are you doing, Daddy?"

He stopped digging, leaned on the splintered handle of the wooden shovel and looked up at her. He was a handsome man with a smooth, strong jaw, kind brown eyes and a quick smile, but he looked tired and worn now. His shoulders were high and broad, his body strong. Her daddy was a hard-working man; a good man. He worked long hours during the week and on the weekends he seemed perpetually caught up in projects and chores around the house and yard. He never rested.

"Hey, honey," he called. "Morning." He stammered as if he were nervous. Probably he was just tired. He wiped a dirty glove across his sweaty forehead, leaving a smear of black mud. "I'm digging out a spot for a pond. For your mom's garden. Want to come grab a shovel?"

"Uh, no."

He smiled at her then, briefly.

"No," he said. "I didn't think so."

"I would," Alicia lied, "but Courtney's here. Can't just leave her in here. That would be rude."

"Guess it would, huh?" He scooped another shovelful of brown soil from the hole into a pile, then smiled up at her again. That goofy you-know-I'm-messing-with-you smile that he threw her way each time he mentioned a boyfriend or her makeup, teasing her as if she was still a little girl.

Alicia hadn't seen that smile in some time.

A voice, small and sweet, came from behind Alicia. "Who you talking to?"

She turned to Courtney, who sat on the bed, her long dark hair a frizzy mess, like something from a shampoo commercial.

“My dad.”

“Oh,” said Courtney. She stretched her thin arms out above her disheveled head and yawned like a lion. “What’s he doing?”

“Digging a hole.”

“Like a grave?”

“That’s kind of dark first thing in the morning,” Alicia said, giggling.

“Just asking.”

“It’s going to be a pond. For my mom’s garden.”

“Sounds fun,” Courtney scoffed.

“Yeah. Right.”

“We still going to a movie?”

“I don’t know,” Alicia said. “Probably.” She turned to the window, peeked her head out again. “You still taking us to a movie today?” she called.

Her father stopped shoveling, wiped sweat from his forehead, and smiled that smile. He looked like one of those guys in an old mining photograph with his dirty white T-shirt, blue jeans covered to the knees in heavy clay, and his brown hair grimy and caked to his scalp. He opened his mouth to answer, was about to speak, but the voice of Alicia’s mother cut him short.

“You’re taking them to a movie? I thought you were going to finish this today. We agreed it would be done by tomorrow.”

Alicia’s mother came into view in the yard below, as if walking in from the frame of a picture. She was taller than Alicia with the same long golden hair and pretty feminine features. There were photos hanging on the living room wall of her youthful mother, taken many years ago, that people often confused for her.

Alicia watched her mother now: brushing at her clothes as if the outdoors itself was offensive to her. She cut a wide berth around the hole being dug as if taking extra effort not to get too close to the work.

“I’ll finish the damn pond,” her father was saying. “I told the girls I would take them to a movie today.”

No, not now. Not while I have company. Alicia had hoped they would not fight but it was in the air now, like the smell of something burning.

Her father’s tone had changed, no longer playful, now tense and defensive. Alicia pushed the window down, closing out the chill.

Her parents were always fighting. It had been this way since she could remember. Even in front of company they would argue and yell and be mean and rude to each other. On her tenth birthday, at her party, they had gotten into it and before Alicia knew what was happening she and her friends were sitting in her bedroom, cake and ice cream forgotten, while downstairs her mother shrieked and glass broke. Her father was a good man, and he tried to be a good husband and father, too; but he had a temper. Not that he’d ever hit her, or her mother. He wasn’t the violent type. As far as she knew. But he could rage. Like a bull elephant, he would stamp and roar and frighten those nearby into submission. Alicia hadn’t known how that fight had begun, but she had an idea how it ended.

She’d gone downstairs the following morning while her guests still slept to find her mother snoring on the couch, legs askew, an arm dangling to the floor as if she’d fallen to sleep with a bottle in her hand but there was no bottle there and her father was in the kitchen, down on one knee, sweeping up a broken plate and bluish glass that may or may not have come from wine bottle. Her parents had both stopped drinking after that day, or so she’d been told. Alicia knew her mother had not stopped. Cut down, maybe, but not stopped. Her father had taken Alicia

and her friends out for lunch before taking the other girls home.

None of those girls had been allowed to come over again.

Alicia went to the bed and sat next to Courtney on the pink comforter. "We might not be going," she said, her eyes averted, shamed. "Sorry."

"No big deal," Courtney told her.

The girls looked at one another.

Alicia giggled.

"What?" Courtney said.

"Your hair looks awful."

Courtney went to the vanity, gazed into the mirror. "Wow," she said, picking at her hair. "I need a shower."

"I'll get you a towel."

Alicia went into the adjoining bathroom, took a towel from the linen closet and set it on the counter. When she returned to the bedroom, Alicia could hear her parents through the window, though it was closed. Screaming and swearing. Getting louder. Ushering Courtney into the bathroom, Alicia was secretly praying that one of them would leave before Courtney finished her shower.

Soon as Courtney closed the bathroom door, Alicia crept down the hall, down the stairs and into the kitchen. If she could find lunch meat and bread quick enough, she could be back upstairs before anyone knew she was down here. She would eat in her room, as she often did, and watch TV with Courtney for the rest of the day. She was rummaging through the crisper drawer when the backdoor slammed shut.

Stomping. The smell of anger in the air, thick as blood in water, spreading, tainting everything it touches. The door slammed a second time. With more force.

“Great,” her mother shouted. “You tracked mud across my carpet.”

“I told you white carpet was a bad idea,” her father said.

Alicia stood with the refrigerator door open, hiding her out of her parents’ sight. Frozen. Debating between orange juice and milk. She’d lingered too long. The argument had come to her; she’d be drawn in; frenzied; anxious. Frayed. The noise welled around her like darkness in a cave. She needed to flee.

If only she could reach the stairs.

“I like white,” her mother groused. “I like nice things, for things to look nice. I like my garden. I’ve been asking you for a pond for a year.” Her voice was a quieting diminuendo: her words came in quick bursts of aggression.

“I’ve been working two jobs. I’m tired.” His voice was rising into a fury. His words came like a rush of wind. “I do what I can, when I can. I planted that whole fucking garden for you last year. You didn’t help. You do nothing but sit around here all day painting your nails and updating your status on the fucking internet.”

“We agreed,” her mother was saying, “that I would stay home and raise the children. That’s my job. We agreed on that before we were married.”

The lasso was cast; the net was tightening around her; Alicia was being drawn in. *Close the refrigerator and scurry away.* She’d be safe in her bedroom. Probably. But she couldn’t. She was frozen in place, time slowing like when a fastball speeds toward one’s face and, though it seems to come slowly, there is no avoiding the blunt impact in the end.

“We have one child. And she’s fourteen. There’s nothing stopping you from working.”

Alicia wasn’t hungry now. She needed to close the door and simply slide past them and get back to her sanctuary. But was there time? She was approaching the point of no return, soon she’d be called to take a side, to prove a point. She prayed,

to her own mind, the voice she heard there that was screaming at her to flee, that Courtney was still in the shower and not hearing any of this.

“Why can’t you finish the pond today?”

“Because I can’t get anything done with all your bitching.”

“Convenient. Blame me.”

“I told you I’ll finish the damn pond. It’ll go a lot quicker if you just shut up and let me get to it. I don’t need you to supervise me.”

“Obviously you do. You were running off to take the girls to a movie.” She motioned to Alicia, who had believed, wished, assumed her presence had gone unnoticed. “That seems to be more important than keeping a promise to me.” Alicia felt the heat behind her eyes pushing forward. Tears welled and she couldn’t fight them.

“I don’t want to go a movie,” she whispered. “Just, please stop. Stop fighting.” She stared into the light at the back of the refrigerator. “At least while Courtney’s here.”

“There,” her mother said. “Hear that? She doesn’t want to see a movie. That frees up your day.”

“She only said that to shut you up,” her father sneered. “Wish someone could.”

“She wouldn’t dare. Now will you please go finish my pond?”

“You know what?” he said. “Finish your fucking pond yourself. I’m done.” Alicia saw him look at her and when he spoke his voice had lost the threatening edge it had held against his wife. “I have to get cleaned up, sweetheart. Then we’ll go.”

Alicia cringed, her neck jerking so violently that a pain shot through her back as her mother, eyes bulging, face flushing, raged into her father’s face,

shrieking.

“Go finish that pond,” she commanded. “Why do you never do anything for me? If your dad calls and needs something, you run to help him. Your boss calls and says jump, and you jump. But for your wife you do nothing. Why is it so hard for you to do anything for me?”

Every muscle in her body clenched at once. The vibrations of her mother’s voice rattled her insides. Alicia crumpled and fell. Without warning, she vomited. Her stomach hurt so much in that moment she thought she might die, wanted to die, but still the vomit came, spilling from her like a ruptured water mattress.

She needed to scream but could not. In that moment she hated them both. Real, true, deep hatred. She wanted them to die.

She needed to run from the room. To flee from her life. But all she managed to do was to sit and cry.

Her parents were there, in the room, but she could not look up at them as she toppled to the floor. Their voices were there with her, but that was all. They could have been strangers, distant strangers.

“Get out my face,” her father was saying, spitting the words between clenched teeth. “You don’t need to act like a fucking nut all the time.”

He noticed Alicia then. But maybe he’d seen her before. She didn’t know.

“Oh, sweetie,” he said, and knelt next to her.

“Get her to the shower,” her mother said.

The stench of throw up mingled with last night’s pizza only made things worse. The more she smelled, the more she heaved. Alicia felt her daddy’s arms lift her in a way she’d not been lifted in years. She was weightless and weak, her body limp, her insides clenched. She couldn’t think straight. What was happening? Why were they fighting again? Was it her fault? She often believed it was. Maybe there

had been a time, long before her birth, when her parents had loved each other?

This happened every time dad was going to take her to do anything, no matter how trivial. Like mom was jealous. But why? Shouldn't a daddy love his daughter?

"Well, move," her father barked as he cradled Alicia and moved his wife out of the way with an elbow.

Alicia heaved again. Her spray splattered her mother's black and white top. "Damn it," her mother cried. "My new shirt. Get her to the bathroom."

At noon, Alicia lay in bed next to Courtney flipping through channels. Disney Channel, Lifetime, MTV. Nothing worth watching. Not that she was paying attention, really. Her dad had carried into the downstairs bathroom and left her to clean herself, recruiting Courtney to take her some clean clothes. The girls retreated to the sanctuary of Alicia's room then, sitting in awkward silence for nearly two hours while the television flickered with images of other people living other lives. Alicia had lit two vanilla candles in an effort to cover the lingering odor of vomit. Now she went to the window and opened it.

She lay still and quiet, waiting for the day to pass.

Courtney played *Tetris* on her cell phone.

"It's okay, you know," Courtney said.

The broken silence plucked Alicia's nerves, made her stomach tense again. She didn't want to acknowledge her parents' fight. Didn't want Courtney to be uncomfortable.

"My parents fight too," Courtney said. "My mom says it's a normal part of marriage. Says two people can't always get along. It doesn't mean they don't love each other."

They did not look at one another.

“Sucks, though,” Alicia said. She had brushed her teeth twice, but the taste of vomit clung to the inside of her mouth like a thick film.

“Yeah,” Courtney said. “But it’s not a big deal. Just have to deal with it.”

“How? What do you do to deal with it? They fight all the time. Scream. Throw things. Mom drinks. A lot. She thinks I don’t know, but I do.”

Why was she saying this? The words came pouring out before the thoughts formed in her head. With each syllable, the ache in her body intensified. She was going to cry again. If she had the strength left.

“They hit each other?” Courtney asked.

“I’ve seen mom hit dad. She slaps him when they fight. And throws things at him. I’ve never seen him hit her. I don’t think he would. But if he did, I’m not sure I could blame him.”

“Boys shouldn’t hit girls,” Courtney said.

Alicia said, “Nobody should hit anybody.”

Shouting again. In the backyard.

“We’re not going to the movies, are we?” Courtney asked. She was pressing buttons on her cell phone.

“Doubt it,” Alicia said. “Who are you texting?”

“My mom. She wants to come get me.”

“No,” Alicia blurted. She sat up quickly and her stomach churned and hurt.

“Don’t go, yet. I’ll do your hair. And your nails.” Alicia was desperate. She could not be alone. Courtney had been her best friend for two years and Alicia knew she loved having her hair done. “Then we’ll get some lunch and get online for a while.”

“I’ll ask,” Courtney said and pressed keys on her phone.

The girls found lunch meat and cheese for sandwiches. They found chips and cookies in the cupboard. Alicia made cherry Kool-Aid. She could not eat, but Courtney was hungry and it was nearly two o'clock. Downstairs was quiet for the moment.

The tension had been relieved and the girls were giggling when the pungent odor of gasoline reached them.

"What is that?" Courtney asked.

"Gas?" Alicia said. She sprang from her chair and sprinted for the backdoor, yelling, "Dad!" No answer until she pulled open the door and saw her parents standing next to the hole her father had been digging all morning. They stood on opposite sides of the pit, screaming at each other, still.

Her father held a red plastic can—the gas can he used for the lawn mower—waving it around like a madman.

"I'll burn it," he said, his voice low, his bulging eyes bloodshot. His face was haggard as if he'd aged five years in two hours. He splashed gasoline on the nearest cluster of begonias.

Mother backed away a step, onto the cement patio near the door. "You're crazy. You're fucking nuts. You've lost it. I hate you. Never should have married you. I could have done so much better."

"Good luck," he said. "I can't imagine anyone putting up with you this long."

He marched in a small circle, pouring little streams of yellow fluid onto plants around him.

"I can't believe you're acting like this. This is it. I'm leaving you, you crazy bastard. I'm leaving and I'm taking Alicia and you'll never see her again after this."

Alicia backed away. She'd heard this threat before and each time it made her

sick. She felt like she was going to throw up again. *Not today.* No more today. She had to get away. But how? And where? This was her home. This was her family.

“Oh, I’ll see my daughter,” he said. He jumped into the hole. A shovel stood beside him, blade buried in the earth. He held a cigarette lighter in his hand, thumb ready to spark it. “I told you I’d finish your fucking pond. I just need you to go into the house and get the hell away from me.”

Alicia watched as her mother stepped forward, grab a handful of his hair. Things were about to get physical and dangerous.

Alicia closed the door.

They’ve both lost it. For real this time.

She needed to get out of here, just get away. And she needed to get Courtney away, too. Alicia did not want her friend exposed to another second of her parents’ insanity, but neither could she be left alone right now.

When Alicia returned to the kitchen, Courtney was seated at the table, looking down at her half-eaten sandwich.

“Let’s walk down to the park,” Alicia said, keeping her voice as calm, as even as possible.

“Okay.”

They walked two blocks to the city park where younger children played while mother’s gossiped. Alicia motioned to the empty swing set. Courtney veered toward it. They swung gently, silently, watching a group of boys walk by, tossing a football between them.

“He’s cute,” Courtney said, pointing to a dark-haired boy.

In the distance, sirens screamed through midday air. Alicia disregarded them. She’d heard enough noise for the day.

“That’s Jeremy Michaels,” Alicia said. “He’s in my History class. He’s new this

year. I kind of like him.”

“Let’s go say hi,” Courtney said, smiling.

“No,” Alicia said. “I don’t know. Maybe later.”

The boys continued to throw the ball.

“He’ll be gone later.” Courtney hopped off her swing, tugging at Alicia’s wrist. “Come on.”

“Fine,” Alicia conceded. She followed Courtney, keeping a safe distance between her and the eyes of Jeremy Michaels.

The sirens were close now. The boys ran into the street, trying to glimpse the vehicles and, with luck, see where they were headed.

A fire engine raced by, followed by an ambulance and two blue police cruisers, rushing back the way Alicia and Courtney had come. Alicia’s stomach lurched again. She was sure she’d be sick again. *Wretch and puke right here in front of everyone.* Nothing quite as embarrassing as public vomiting. She wouldn’t do it. Not here. Not in front of Jeremy Michaels. She would hang onto her composure, to her dignity.

Alicia looked away from the street.

She looked at Courtney, her blue eyes wide and knowing, stared into Courtney’s brown eyes. Alicia opened her mouth to speak, but could not say anything. Her face and neck hurt with the strain of tension. Her eyes ached with the heat of tears once more.

Courtney slipped an arm around Alicia.

“Lots of people live that way,” Courtney told her. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Scars are souvenirs you never lose

---'Name'/Goo Goo Dolls



M.E. McMullen

Miles' girl friend left a while back, sending him, as Miles put it, *to a bad place*. If you knew Miles, you wouldn't have to ask why she walked. She lugged out several large boxes of anger and two cartons of unhappiness with her, not to mention a whole trunk of angst and a large crate that'd been totally emptied of concern for anybody but herself, all of which she could keep, says Miles.

Dear, sweet Gloria.

She took good things too. Her collection of reggae CDs; her blank stare, her profound indifference to Miles and that sparkling cloak of flirty attractiveness she threw on when she wanted something. She took a decent repertoire of dishes, a great clam dip recipe. Fed up with Miles' brutal deprivation, the relentless facials and arduous hair appointments he forced on her, the grueling shopping trips and the cruel full massages that Miles doggedly subjected her to week after week, she'd finally had enough.

She called him a *cluck*, and to be sure he didn't miss the point, slammed the front door in his face with enough force to jar loose the big mirror in the foyer, which came down on the tile floor with a horrific, gut wrenching crash, shattering into a thousand pieces before Miles's horrified eyes. Gone forever with the mirror were the Japanese pillows, the cigarette butts and the coughing. Gone was the cast iron table, the moose antlers, the assorted voodoo dolls and the stuffed

grasshopper collection. Gloria wasn't coming back. The whole episode, Miles reflected, shows how people can take you to bad places if you let them.

I am Dodds, Miles' selfless, long-suffering buddy and sometime confessor. I endure his infantile rants over misadventures largely of his own making. Beaten down by life to the point where he's not sure if he can answer the bell next time, Miles gains insights all the same, as when it occurs to him that Gloria might've had something with this *cluck* stuff, or that maybe he was a little hasty calling her a *complete* phony when she was really only a partial phony, not that it mattered. She left a scar on his memory, but she made good pancakes, so it was kind of a tradeoff with Gloria.

With her mouth screwed up into a tight little ball of scolding disapproval and her hair scrambled down across her face like wild ivy on a long neglected wall, she could look ghoulish. At other times, when she bothered, Gloria was more than presentable. Miles started thinking about her one cool Saturday morning and developed a sudden craving for pancakes. He was up early, stomach grumbling. He mumbled something like, '*Honey, why don't you cook some pancakes?*' but she didn't answer. She'd been gone for months. It freaked Miles out afterward. He threw on a jacket, headed for the door. "I could practically taste those little golden beauties," he recalled, "all soggy with maple syrup, drenched in salted butter."

Barry's Big Burger up on Mainline Road used to have decent pancakes. The Raffle House (Home of the Raffleburger) on Highway 61 serves those little silver dollar pancakes you eat by the dozens, but the best place for pancakes was Mort's White Rose, which was where Miles was headed on the fateful day of which we speak. Joey Mort played two years for the Chicago Cubs before he came back here to be the star of our local Carpet Town minor league team, the Rugs. Joey bought

the team and the White Rose when he was with the Rugs. He put in a breakfast bar, came out with the `Rug Special', featuring the `*best pancakes east of the Pecos*'.

A trip to the White Rose was Traffic Jam City, a clogged road near a busy freeway ramp but the pancakes were calling. According to Miles, a state of being came with the first loving swallows of those White Rose pancakes, less belly than mind, a sense of well-being thicker than that sweet old sticky syrup itself.

“The world’s a better place,” Miles says, capping his apotheosis to the great hotcakes of the White Rose. “Maybe I’m *not* a cluck. Maybe, I’m hunting the sugar fix; like you, Doddsy, the victim of a pathological person.” This last remark is a reference to the vicious psychopath, Ramona `Rummy' Dodds, my take-no-prisoners ex-wife, determined as ever to dance some day on my grave.

Quaffing a few in the Don Lee’s Tavern, I marvel at Miles’ ability to cast his sad tale of unrequited love as tragedy, in view of the horror that was my marriage. If there are, as is said, three sheets to be put to the wind, two of ours are already flying high and the third is being moved into place as Miles proceeds with his sob story.

“First, I fight the endless southbound traffic on North Bend Road,” he says. “Big, big ass delay, which gives me a freaking headache. Limping along in the fits and starts of stop and go, finally making that right turn into the White Rose parking lot, I’m so close to the pancakes of my dreams that I’ve become a quivering, salivating wild animal and do not notice at first the bulldozer and a twenty foot pile of rubble where Mort’s White Rose once stood. No Wild Rose pancakes today or ever. Cascades of alienation replace the anticipated sense of well-being, superimposed over raw, gnawing hunger. I am lost but not *just* lost. I am out of touch with life.”

“Not a happy prospect, Miles, but neither is it a disaster of the magnitude of the train wreck that was my marriage.”

Cocking his head in defiance of the forces of nature and the cruel vagaries of life, in total denial that anything could compare with his lonely, futile existence as a cluck, he stares into his beer. “There’s more,” he says.

The drive he describes is well known, reviving memories of Rummy’s embarrassing disaster when she was caught shoplifting exotic soap. Nabbed before I could intervene, she was soon mouthing off to an assistant manager, pushing a clerk and trying to kick a cop. Hauled away by the cops, taken right up that same long curvy driveway very near the place of the great pancakes, she left me crestfallen, following in my car up that same back driveway of Miles’s nightmare experience, making me part of that same miserable fraternity somehow. We faced an existential catharsis there, Miles and his pancakes, me and my coming to the dim realization I’d married a crazy woman. I tried that summer, with Rummy, I mean, I really did. I helped her deal with her sleep walking and her ongoing psychosis, trying to let her exercise control over her demons. She paid back my concern and kindness by shoplifting exotic soap and throwing a fit when she was caught. My thoughts went running back to that same narrow driveway, like some narrow passageway in our lives.

“Can you picture, Doddsy, that driveway winding down the hill at the back of the lot where the White Rose once stood?”

“I can.”

“Past the Wal-Mart Parking Lot,” he says, “past various commercial venues arriving eventually at a road with very little traffic. Congratulating myself for remembering this back way, I cruise around the bend and over the hill, following the narrow lane as it curves down, with no way of knowing, of course, that dark

personal oblivion awaits just around the bend.”

“Dark, personal, ---”

“*Oblivion*, yes, beginning at the spot where the driveway’s blocked off by a plastic saw horse barrier with a large sign saying NOT A THRU STREET. The only thing keeping it from being a thru street is the large NOT A THRU STREET sign. Most discouraging of all, the road ends abruptly just around the bend, and there’s no room to turn around.”

“All for pancakes.”

A grim look passes across Miles’ face. “There’s more,” he says. “Taking a quick gaze over my shoulder, I twist around awkwardly, drop her into reverse and start backing up, very slowly, around the bend, going okay for a few seconds until the tires bump hard against the curb and the back bumper rides up over one of the saw horses.”

“Not good.”

“Rocking the car to get free doesn’t work, so, I jerk the wheel, hit the gas and seriously crunch the sawhorse, double jamming it underneath the car. My stomach’s in my throat, my eyes are bugged out, and I’m beginning to feel like a candidate for some kind of fatal attack; a stroke, cardiac arrest, mental meltdown, something bad.”

“You know, Miles, ---”

“There’s more,” he says.

I try to picture it.

Out of the car, Miles has a go at the sawhorse, sliding underneath on his back in the grit, cursing and growling at it. As he’s reliving the experience, he begins to sweat profusely, his face a mask of anguish and despair, reminding me of my own

frustration the day dear Rummy maxed our four credit cards to the tune of forty eight thou in one vindictive, self-indulgent spree, charging everything from mink-lined walking boots which she never wore, to a grand piano she couldn't play, all of which I learned about, ironically, at the very spot where Miles tangled with the devil plastic sawhorse.

This diabolical event proves Miles was indeed the cluck he always feared he was. The tortuous bending and twisting of the malleable sawhorse as he attempts to dislodge it lends a macabre animation to the scene in my mind, as if the plastic came alive just to bedevil Miles. In the viral You Tube posting that followed, Miles became a kind of everyman hero figure standing for all the frustrated fools who ever were, and for all the clucks who ever got into a life and death tussle with an inanimate object that could anticipate his every move and trump him at every turn. Prying at it only infuriated it more. Cursing it, beating at it only makes things worse. When he finally crawls out, he kicks a tire and hurts his toes. Stupid.

"Here's a kid, ten or eleven, passing by on his bike," Miles recalls, "catching this incredible cluck show on his cell phone camera. The sawhorse encounter turns out to be the kid's first truly viral posting, which may be his break in showbiz, make him world famous before he turns twelve."

"Yeah."

"I thought about a cryptic quote for posterity," Miles said, "like how easy it was to get dragged into bad places, but I figured if some good came of it, all the better. Maybe the kid learned a lesson. Maybe not."

"Any good come of it?"

"Not until last night," Miles said.

“What happened last night?”

“She asked me not to mention it.”

“She?”

“Ramona. She heard about the internet post and called me. We talked about Gloria. We talked about the sawhorse. We talked about a bunch of things. Mostly we talked about you, Dodds.”

“She called me a few months ago at four a.m., claiming she wired a bomb to my car, which I knew wasn’t true because she couldn’t wire anything to anything. I hung up on her. My car started fine.”

“It was chocolate allergy. She’s been off chocolate and her life has totally turned around. She says she feels terrible about what she put you through, Dodds.”

“I’ll bet.”

The chocolate rap sounded like another Ramona denial fantasy, like the bomb wired to my car. Boundless as it was warped, her imagination often ran to places where distinguishing between fantasy and reality was a challenge. She believed her own excuses for *‘jumping the trolley’*, as she described her meltdowns. As long as she had someone or something to blame besides herself, she was fine. As for her feeling bad about it, that might have been true. When the feverish hurt finally wears off, another more permanent hurt takes over. It begins with remembering only the hope at the beginning and ends with the stupid ache that hangs around forever after the hope is long gone.

“She was very clear-eyed, Dodds. Very sure in her speech. She was on the level about the whole thing. The chocolate messes up brain chemistry. Couple éclairs, she turns into Attila the Hun. We’ve had coffee a few times. I may start seeing her, Dodds. I hope you don’t mind.”

Mind?

Well, the idea caught me cold, but once I thought about it, I did mind, not that I'd ever let on to Miles. If he wanted to see my ex-wife, fine. "Go for it," I say. "Is there such a thing as Chocolate Abuser's Anonymous?" I might have smirked through that last line. The notion that Rummy had gone straight over night struck me as unlikely, but it did give me an idea. Since I actually *did* run into Gloria at the grocery store, which I didn't mention to Miles because he goes into shock when her name's mentioned, working himself into a funk over some unkind cut from her, maybe I should call her.

"You know, I saw Gloria a week or so ago at the grocery store, and I have to tell you, she was definitely on her game. Like I say, I thought about, you know, ---"

"Calling her?"

"Would you mind if I did?"

Miles grins, which I know for the fake grin he often throws up when he's trying to grin his way through one of the bad places he is routinely being sent to by fate. Seeing his pal and confessor Dodds with his ex girl friend would frost him for sure, but he would never admit that for a second. "Give her a call."

"Maybe I will," I say, doubting I ever would, but reserving the right anyway, deciding that I just might for spite. Sometimes you just don't want to hear certain things because you don't want to hear them. They connect you to places where you don't want to go, and the problem is that there's always more hurt where that came from, more old scars.

"There's more," he says.

"There always is."

The Loss of You



Brianne Kohl

I was lying in the dark alone in our bed, hoping to fall asleep when the phone rang. It was my cell phone, the one you bought me for Christmas last year, sitting on the nightstand. The screen lit the room up in green shades of alien light. The read-out said 'Caller Unavailable' but I recognized your ring tone: David Bowie's London Bye Ta-Ta.

It caught me quick - that heartless hope that has no business being. Because, you are gone and I know, I know, I know you can't come back. But, then, an odd sort of vibration shook the frame of the bed. It nudged me up and forward like a hard elbow to the ribs. The phone shut itself off mid-ring and I was pitched back into the yellowing darkness.

I scooted back and sat still against the headboard. I wasn't moving the bed - I wasn't even breathing. It wasn't an earthquake or a sink hole opening up under the foundation of the house. It wasn't the rattle of thunder - moonlight was streaming in through the open window and crickets were chirping. You used to laugh at me when I'd jump at the house settling. You'd tell me I was wound too tight, like a spring driven clock running fast, gaining minutes on the hour. But, it was more than a vibration shaking the frame. It was an *awareness*. It was that shiver at the base of your skull when you are blinded and realize you are no longer the only person in the room.

People think I'm going nuts out here in this big old house by myself. I've heard the whispers. I can't walk into a room without the mumbles trailing behind

me like a nasty child. Taunting me. How is that right? How is that fair? I'm still right here, where I always was. You are the body missing.

The phone in your study will ring at odd hours and I'll run through the house, down the stairs, desperate to catch it. Desperate for any link to your life. But no one is ever on the line. No heavy breathing, no late night obscene calls I could blame on kids, just the ringing of the phone and dead air. Which, I guess is no big deal except it never happened when you were still with me.

I've been living off canned soup lately - I think I've lost almost fifteen pounds. The house is too quiet and I can't eat, I can barely breath with the loss of you. The other day, I went to the grocery store and bought a cart full of tomato soup because it was always your favorite. Can you imagine? An entire cart full of red and white cans and nothing else. I brought them home and put them away in the pantry, stacked rows of canned soup. Later, when I went to pull a can down, they were all dented. Not just little dings but craters and bulges in the aluminum. It was as if someone had thrown them on the floor in a fit of rage and re-stacked them. The linoleum in the kitchen had pockets and rips that were never there before.

Doors open and close on their own now. One night last week, I woke up sweating, needing water so I came downstairs. The front door was standing wide open. I know I closed it and locked it before bed. I stood in the foyer, frozen as I looked through our open front door and I tried to see you somewhere in the darkness. I looked for you in every shadow. Someone could have broken in, killed me, destroyed me, and taken everything. And, I was standing in the foyer in my thin summery nightgown looking for you in the flickering florescent light of the porch.

When I came to my senses, when I realized how stupid I was being, I

slammed the door shut. I ran back upstairs and grabbed your old baseball bat you left in the closet. I checked every room, behind every fluttering curtain. No one was there.

The air feels so cold in this house, sometimes. Pockets of cold, stagnant air. The chill feels personal - it swirls around me like turkey buzzards around a dead thing in the road. I feel it on the stair case when I think of that night we drank that whole bottle of blackberry wine. We were so drunk on each other that we didn't make it up to the bedroom. I feel it in your study as I go through your things, sorting them out, packing them up. I feel it right now.

Your damn closet door won't stay shut, either. That door used to stick. Remember how hard you would have to yank to un-stick the swollen wood and paint? How you would have to open it for me when I put your clothes away? But, now, it creaks open so slowly and then creaks itself shut. Creaks open and creaks shut.

If I'm being honest, I'm not really sleeping anymore. I know the house settles. I know the wind cracks against the roof at night. I think a squirrel has made a nest in the attic. Is it wrong that I'm thankful for the company?

It wasn't supposed to be like this. We had our whole lives ahead of us. We had a family to conceive. This house, this old house with its summer porches and gabled roofs was our dream, wasn't it? I always used to joke that after moving in, one of us would surely die in this house. Why do I do that? Why do I joke about the important things?

Remember when we were teenagers and we watched that really old, campy version of The Amityville Horror? We huddled together on your parent's sofa. You made it to second base for the first time as I cringed from the sight of Jody the Pig. Why is it that sex seems so much sexier when it's mixed with a little fear?

Sometimes, I wake up to find bruises all over my body. Dark, angry bruises on my thighs and stomach. I'm scared. And, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I am so pissed at you for leaving. I wake up with my fists and jaw clenched tight. When I look at those bruises, I feel an empty rage roll over my skin. Because those bruises belong to you, too. You promised to keep me safe. You promised to take care of me. You promised to love me until we both died. You told me you wanted to die holding my hand.

None of these things would be happening if you were still here. Can't we just meet somewhere? You could come over, if you wanted. To check on the house, to take care of the squirrels in the attic, maybe. Maybe she wouldn't approve but she isn't your wife. I'm your wife.

Would she survive the loss of you? Would the same ghosts haunt her that have burrowed so deep into me. I have to see you. I have to see you. Please don't make me beg.

I'm your wife. I don't care about her. I don't care that you tell her you love her. What does that really mean, anyways? You love me. You said it. You meant it every time you kissed me goodbye in the morning. I felt it every time you walked through our front door, every time your eyes sought out mine. I don't care that she is skinny and I don't care that she is young. I don't care that she is pregnant. Did you think I wouldn't find out? You don't know that baby is yours, not really. How could you know? How could you trust? She will hate you, one day. Women like that, all they know how to do is hate and destroy.

I am your wife. I know things about you that she will never understand. I've seen the way she looks at you when you think you are alone. In those moments, when you are both blinded, believing you are the only two people in the room. When you feel that shiver, like a bee sting, at the base of your skull. I see you. I see

it. She idolizes you - it's so obvious. It's so sick. You know love based on infatuation can never last.

It Happened on St. John's



Travis Sharp

The day Mr. Harris spoke, a waterspout nearly hit the building.

This is the thing that makes her jaw drop.

Berta is the supervisor for Mr. Harris's care. She comes by his condominium once a year for a review. My mother left just as she came in the door. My mother works here, too. And my sister. We say that we work for Mr. Harris, because it's for him that we do all this. It's his millions that fill our paychecks.

Berta wants to know everything, right now. I feel like we shouldn't be talking about his life as he sits there, listening to my every word. But perhaps this is the idea. Perhaps she is afraid I would be less honest if there wasn't a living polygraph sipping Starbucks next to me.

Let's be sure to cover everything.

He can't remember much. He's afraid of deviation.

He'll fuss if we go somewhere new. The definition of new is somewhere beyond the condominium complex, Starbucks, and this side of Memorial Park. New is leaving before he's finished the drink he thinks has caffeine in it. New is a homeless man asking to trade this cell phone he's found for a five, and then Mr. Harris fighting to get out of the chair, fighting for a fight.

He demands routine. It's not boring. It's safe. Safety is exciting.

Sometimes he'll forget who I am, or who he is, and he'll have a moment. A moment is when he tries to stand, meaning he's trying to grab at something and

toss it, meaning breaking something worth more than five thousand dollars because that's all that he owns. Honestly. The living room may be tacky, but it's tacky with taste. Old sofas and chairs from the 30s are crushed by sculptures and paintings from the artists themselves. Nothing store-brand here. Mr. Harris visited my apartment once and asked me if he really paid me that little, if I was so poor. That was a long time ago, before the change. Now he'll make gestures and expect me to understand, which would be fine if they made sense. Suddenly his arms are going in circles. Suddenly his arms are flapping, as if preparing to take flight.

And so we go to the park. The schedule says twice a day. But here's what happens. He takes naps throughout the day and he thinks that he's slept all the night through, even though it's only been two hours and it's still in the afternoon. He must feel ancient. And each day is almost nothing. I heard once that time speeds up as you get older. Well, our perception of it. If we could live long enough a minute would be a second, a marriage would be a date, and life threatens to get shorter – not longer – the longer we stay in it.

It's been a week and it's not yet four o'clock.

There was something disconcerting nearby. It's the homeless man sprawled out on the bench I hear groaning, old newspapers retrieved from overflowing trash bins stuffed underneath his body. Classifieds and sports columns flow to the southeast at fifteen miles per.

His wheelchair has cut his height in half and his communication is distant and foreign, a language he created and only he can understand. A lonely place. Of course he does but I can't help but wonder if he sees everything that I can see. Does he see the fisherman that sit on the benches, casting their lines over the wall next to the No Fishing sign? Does he see the sign? Does he remember how to read? Or does he only understand his personal sign language, an interpretive

dance of the arms and the mind and his personality, struggling to break free.

Berta knows all of this, she says, and she asks if there are any new developments. She used to be a journalist and it shows. Each conversation is an interview, and she speaks as if speaking to a camera.

This is where I tell her about yesterday. Mary was working yesterday. Mary is short and wears shirts and skirts that are too small for her body and she smells like yesterday's breakfast.

My sister lives next door, in a tiny condo stuffed into the other end of the floor. Mr. Harris owns the entire floor. He bought the second condo for his son, a rich man's guest room. Someone needed to be on call at all times, just in case. You never know what will happen. Mr. Harris will forget who you are. You could need an extra pair of arms to lift him into the bed on the worst of days when he becomes borderline catatonic, a dead weight.

My sister was out of town. She was visiting her daughter in Michigan with her girlfriend. I was house-sitting, she called it. I saw myself as taking part in a bad comedy, and the camera closes in on my face and right then she'll burst back in the door to grab something embarrassing. Only this is my sister, so instead of something embarrassing it's extra soap and three bottles of hand sanitizer.

I saw it that day. It wasn't a gradual thing like you'd expect. It just happened, right there on St. Johns. It was close. A funnel of water connected the river with the black clouds, swirling like a heavenly drain.

Mary was working, I said. But she hadn't been working here for long. She's a Florida beach babe, minus the babe. She's my brother's girlfriend. Reason for employment: my mother likes her. My mother was the only reason Mr. Harris let her stay. Mr. Harris is crazy about my mother. He'd do anything for anything. He has done anything for her.

Mary panicked when she saw it. She called me and then came to get me, dragging me through rooms of art and dusted silverware. I stopped at a window on the way and watched it move closer. Either it was getting larger or it was getting nearer. The men in their boats on the river were still there, daring God to capsize their Titanic. And then the sun went down, and the clouds that were black before were truly black and everything was quiet. Life was on standstill and each second was a minute and each minute was a second. Knowing the age of the building, I knew that soon the collapse would begin. The wood floors would roll like ocean waves and the aged concrete, God help us, will turn to gravel on the spot.

And out of this scene came a dreadful sound. I thought it was myself. For the first time, I was hearing myself, my real self, what has lain beneath me all these years. But what I thought was me was just the mixing of the water and the wind, the grand whirl that inevitably comes.

Mary, bless her, went down to the lobby and out the front door. From there, she found her car parked across the street and left, shrinking as she approached the interstate, disappearing completely by the time she arrived home.

He fired her, I said. Berta nods and takes a sip. Mr. Harris asks for another frappuccino.

I sit on the balcony at night leaning against the edge. The lights of the riverboats below reach up and illuminate everything within reach.

It will be September soon, but the residents of Park Lane Condominiums will hardly take notice. The calendars are all still set to 1987 and the clocks shift back on the hour, perpetually noon in this land of the orderly and the obese. Next Monday is the monthly residential meeting, where all can meet and vote on

proposals submitted by Ms. Something, owner of floors three and seven. Mr. Harris will go. He will wheel himself around and take the microphone by force and declare himself returned from exile.

My sister is coming back tomorrow, and I can go home.

I think of the waterspout coming to the balcony where I wait. It lifts me up and tosses me beneath St. Johns and becomes a charybdis, within which I become encapsulated, a dirty jewel drowning in the sea, displaced and entombed.

After



Dani Bordelon

The images are few, but vivid, like stills from one of those old messed-up VCR tapes, the sound static and the screen a blur of color.

A green leaf against a patch of white snow.

A stretch of unpaved road ending in a small white house with blue shutters.

The shy smile of a boy with freckles across his nose and a light in his eyes.

A wagon with two broken wheels lying in a bed of red begonias.

To anyone else, these images would be inconsequential. Silly, even. But not to me.

These are the before.

When they don't think I'm listening, they say it couldn't have been an accident. They say nothing was wrong with the car. They say the brakes were fine. They say the road wasn't slick or icy or rough. They don't say the word, but I hear it all the same. It doesn't bother me. I want them to say it; I want to shout it to the heavens for all to hear.

SUICIDE! I want to scream. *I attempted suicide!*

It's absolute. No conjecture, no theories, no memories involved. The road wasn't slick or icy or rough. The brakes were fine. Nothing was wrong with the car. All facts. Solid facts that lead to one conclusion.

Sometimes I lie in bed and try to picture it, to *live* it. The rush of the wind in my hair as I press the accelerator down hard. The sweat on my palms as I grip the

steering wheel. The jolt as I smash through the metal railing. The thrill of the free fall.

I'm free! I imagine thinking. *Finally free!* From what, I never guess. Guessing is for before.

And then the shock as I hit the cold icy water, which fills the car quickly through the open window.

They say it was fate that two cliff jumpers happened to be there that day, right off the highway. They say it's an incredible miracle that one happened to be an emergency room doctor.

I don't know if that's true. Maybe it was a sick, cruel joke. Maybe it was whatever I was running from's way of saying, *You thought you were free, huh? Well just wait.*

I don't know. I'll never know. So if you're looking for answers, stop right here, you've come to the wrong place. If you're looking for questions, read on.

The first after memory is his face over mine. Sharp and angular, it reminded me of a hawk staring down at me. No freckles dusted his nose. No light filled his blue eyes.

"She's awake!" He shouted, his smile dazzlingly white, like in one of those toothpaste commercials. (I know what you're thinking—aha! She *does* remember things from before! And yes, I do. Math, bits of French and history, English of course, things like famous people and places and how to do everyday things like eat with a spoon or stand on one leg. But no, the toothpaste commercial came after).

Timidly, a woman came forward. She looked down at me and touched me tenderly, as if afraid I might break, and whispered, "Oh Amelia, we've missed you."

I looked around the brightly lit hospital room for Amelia. A man hung back by the door, his face haggard and unshaven. His eyes jumped away when they met mine. Not Amelia, unless his parents were very cruel. Other than that, the room was empty.

“Um, hi,” I started awkwardly, wincing at my hoarse voice.

Why am I in the hospital? This was the first of my questions.

“I’m sorry,” I continued, “but I think you have the wrong girl. My name is...”

I trailed off. *What is my name?* The second question of many.

The woman’s eyes grew round and panicked, the boy’s angry.

My heart began to beat faster, sweat dripping off my brow into my eyes. I wiped it away furiously. What was my name? It must be Amelia, I decided, remembering how the woman looked at me when she said the name—my name.

Amelia. A nice name, I suppose. A little old fashioned, maybe a tad stuffy.

Amelia. I let it repeat in my mind, wondering if with it a rush of recognition would follow.

It didn’t.

“Doctor!” The woman shouted, her brow furrowing.

“Doctor!” The boy repeated, his beady, birdlike blue eyes never leaving mine.

A round of questions ensued.

What is your name?

“Amelia?”

What year is it?

“I don’t know.”

Who is the president?

“I don’t know.”

What is the last thing you remember?

“There was a leaf...a leaf on a patch of snow. And a wagon. Where’d you put the wagon?”

Do you know who I am?

This one came from the woman—who I would later learn was my mother.

“No.”

Amelia. Mia, baby. Do you remember me sweetheart?

This one from the hawk—my boyfriend. Apparently Before Me liked being called pet names like baby and sweetheart. Gag.

“No. Where’s the guy with the freckles?”

No questions came from the man with the guilty eyes.

This continued on and on for what seemed like hours, until finally the doctor brought my family in a corner of the room to give them my diagnosis.

“She has retrograde amnesia,” he said, not even bothering to whisper. For some reason, once you forget everything, everyone seems to think if they move away five feet you won’t hear them. It’s a memory loss disorder, people, not a hearing disorder.

“Will she get better?” The hawk asked, staring down the doctor with his beady eyes. For a moment I felt bad for the balding, exhausted man in the white lab coat but then recalled the last hour of questioning. “Will she start to remember?”

He sighed. There was to be a lot of sighing in the weeks that followed. “Impossible to say. She sustained substantial head trauma. But she seems lucid—”

Everyone turned to look at me. I stared back, daring them to say otherwise.

“—and still retains her intelligence. We’re lucky that she does not have more significant brain damage, lucky that she’s alive actually.”

“Lucky?” Guilty Eyes, the man from the corner, who I now guessed to be my father, finally spoke. In my mind, I did a little celebratory dance, for I was just two minutes off in my guessing game about the length of time it would take for him to finally speak. Something was wrong with me. Oh yeah, retrograde amnesia.

I giggled.

“Look at her,” he said, his face turning purple with anger, his finger wavering as he pointed at me, “she’s out of her goddamn mind! There has to be something we can do to fix her.”

And in the months that followed, they tried their best. We went to doctor after doctor, some just as stuck up as Mr. Baldy, some hippy and spiritual who burned incense to ‘invoke the deepest recesses of the mind’. Their final diagnoses were all the same: my memories weren’t coming back any time soon. Before Me was gone.

And I was fine with that. Too bad no one else was.

The hawk (his name is Jeremy but where’s the fun in that?) came with us to every appointment he could, the most adamant and aggressive in the pursuit of my memory. I began wondering if this would be the after: searching, always searching, for a me that I didn’t want to find. Obviously I was fleeing something that day. Something dark and deep inside of me.

Why bring it back?

There was a bite in the air—the first I could remember feeling—when he finally asked.

I had my window open despite the chill, reveling in the breeze and lightly skimming over the goose bumps on my skin with the tips of my fingers. Before

Me had never opened the window; it had taken fifteen minutes of exertion to pry it open the first day I returned to the house two months before.

I looked around the messy room, so different from the pristine, cold wasteland I had discovered upon my return. For the first few days I had scoured the room, looking for something—*anything* to explain. Not a note or a diary, I knew Before Me wouldn't have stooped to something as base as that the moment I saw the perfect picture on her—my—nightstand the first night. The girl in this picture would never write in a diary or leave a note. No, she would want to disappear elegantly, mysteriously. She would want people to talk about her death for years to come, to wonder why—if even—she took her own life. The girl in the picture did not want to give up her secrets, not even to herself.

It was fairly large, about the size of a piece of paper, and framed. In it, she wore an elegant white gown and her blonde hair flowed past her waist in loose curls. The hawk's arm was firmly around her.

They were laughing.

On the bottom of the picture, near their feet, someone had scrawled one word.

Forever.

Forever. Had she written it? I wondered. If so, had she seen it as a good thing, a happy thing? That didn't seem to add up. I imagined her looking at her nightstand each night at her perfect picture and feeling trapped inside the cold glass, the harsh finality of that single word. No one can be perfect forever, she must have thought, as the laughing girl behind the glass mocked her.

Forever is a very long time.

The knock startled me, causing me to drop the frame I had not realized was in my hands. Nervously, I put it back on the stand, as if caught in the act of

snooping. It's *your* picture, I reminded myself. She's not coming back to catch you!

His voice was gruff yet soft. "Can I come in?"

It was Guilty Eyes, my father.

"Sure!" My voice was overly cheery, forced.

He eased the door open, glancing quickly around the room. His eyes lingered for a second upon the picture on the nightstand. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I was just—just wondering if you wanted to talk about...anything?"

This was the first time he had acted as if anything was wrong. We had spoken, of course, but pleasantries, as if we were strangers. I tried to imagine him holding me as a baby in his arms, singing to me. I couldn't. This man was my father, but without the memories that tie you together, what really is family?

Just blood. Genetics. Scientific crap. Nothing more.

"No, I'm great. I'm fine."

My answers sounded forced, even to my own ears, but he seemed to accept it. He nodded, smiling hesitantly.

"I always did love that picture of the two of you," he said, pointing to the nightstand. "I don't know, something about it, you just look so..."

Perfect? Normal? Different?

"...happy."

He smiled again. "I've missed seeing you happy, kiddo. It's like that doctor said, we're the lucky ones. We've got a second chance. I knew something was wrong, I just...I'm just glad we have you back, is all."

He hovered by the door, as if unsure whether to come closer. I stared at him, amazed by this show of emotion.

Finally, I gestured to my laptop. “I...um...am supposed to do some brain exercises on the computer for tomorrow. You know, to help with my memory.”

He nodded and made to leave the room, but he stopped and turned back, his hand on the door.

“I know it must be hard for you, living in a household of...of strangers. But I know you, Mia, and I know that you’re gonna find your way back. Who knows? Maybe you never even left.”

With that, he left the room, leaving me to wonder whether maybe family was more than just blood after all.

Four months passed before they decided to send me back to school. “The familiar might bring back some of her memories,” the last doctor, a man I had taken to calling Mickey because of his large collection of Mickey Mouse ties, had said, looking away from me at the hawk, Guilty Eyes, and my mother. They usually acted like I wasn’t in the room. I didn’t ever have a say. I wonder if that was what drove Before Me over the edge—literally. It *was* quite infuriating, but After Me liked being alive too much to let it go.

The hawk walked in with me on my first day, his hand firmly encasing mine in what was meant to be a reassuring gesture. He had tried to kiss me two months back, but I had refused.

“I’m not ready,” I had whimpered, forcing fake tears from my eyes. “I don’t even know who I am.”

Not true, of course. I knew exactly who I was: After Me. What I didn’t know is why Before Me had dated him. Was he the one that compelled me off the cliff that day? Or was he someone I thought of with love as I fell? In the end, it was that question that made me keep him around.

Curious eyes and whispers followed us as we walked into the school, a prep academy boasted as the best in Southern California. It was nice, I suppose, all gleaming white walls and shiny blue lockers, but I wasn't proud of it in the way I could see he was. He looked around as if he owned the place, smiling at certain pretty girls, bumping fists with abnormally tall boys, all with me firmly by his side. It wasn't a place I liked to be.

And then I saw him.

He was putting books into his locker, struggling to keep it open as the crowd pushed past him. His hair was longer, curling around his ears, but the freckles were as prominent as I remembered.

Look up, I willed. Look at me.

His eyes flicked upward, a familiar pale green, dancing with light. I stopped in the hallway, out of breath. It was like seeing someone from a dream. No—like seeing someone from another lifetime.

"What are you looking at, babe?"

The hawk followed my gaze. His eyes narrowed.

"Don't encourage him, sweetie. He's been obsessed with you since the ninth grade. He doesn't need encouragement."

I broke his hold on my hand and made a beeline for the boy. I did not name him, as I had the others.

"Hi," I said, out of breath.

"Hi." He looked startled, but kept my gaze even though he must have felt the hawk's eyes poring into him.

"I'm Amelia. What's your name?"

He did not laugh nervously, as all the others had, and say “I know you, Amelia! We’ve known each other since (insert grade here)” as if all of the sudden, just for them, I would remember.

Instead he smiled and stuck out his hand for me to shake. “I’m Andrew.”

There was no blast of memory or sudden epiphany. I still did not know what spurred me to take my own life that sunny summer day in Malibu or what kind of person Before Me was; although I had a feeling I wouldn’t have liked her. All I knew was, with a certainty, that Andrew and I had met before. Had exchanged words, even. And that was more than I could hope for.

Three months later, I kiss him on the stairs leading up to our high school. It is our last day of our junior year, although I have to do work all summer to catch up on what I missed.

I still haven’t remembered anything more than those four images, ingrained vividly in my mind, but there are times when I feel twinges of familiarity. Hearing my mother’s laughter. Feeling the sand beneath my feet. Dancing in my room with the music loud. Maybe one day, these will turn into memories. But some things you don’t need to remember to never forget.

Andrew smiles at me, but shakes his head as if he just doesn’t understand. “I just—I can’t believe...you didn’t even *notice* me before, Amelia.”

I think about telling him that I did, that his face is the only human memory I have from before. But he’d think that’s why I feel this way. And I don’t know why I feel this way; all I know is that I do. So instead I kiss him again, long and hard.

“There is no before.”

We stand there, looking up into each other’s eyes. In his, I can see Before Me and it hurts. She’s sad, miserable, and hopeless, even as she laughs. But she

doesn't own me. She's a friend I drifted apart from long ago and her image fades when I look at his dusting of freckles and eyes filled with light.

Hands entwined, we walk into the school just as the bell rings. To anyone else, this is an inconsequential moment. Silly, even. But not to me.

This is the after.

The Lost Command



Ed Benjamin

The supreme commander of the expedition looked about the command vessel and lamented. One expected losses, but the losses in arriving at the target planet were very significant. Their home planet was 640 light years from their objective. Each group of 350 craft had been encapsulated into modules so that the invasion force of 1400 ships could survive the jump through the space warp. After the entry into near space had been completed, the control center had determined that two of the modules had broken up in hyperspace and the fleet had lost all 700 ships.

The next calamity occurred when the remaining two modules had entered the target solar system and one capsule spun out of control crashing into the frozen wastes of the eighth planet from the star. The remaining squadron had proceeded toward the objective, the third planet from the sun.

This journey through the solar system continued at a slower pace. The trip from the eighth planet to the third planet took approximately three times as long as the trip through the wormhole.

The intelligence section spent its time wisely. The analysts studied the broadcasts of the microwave transmissions received in the lower communications band. Apparently the occupants of this world had not yet mastered the intricacies of higher band transmissions. These transmissions did indicate that the inhabitants were on the verge of creating a viable civilization.

The planet contained the raw materials that the commander's home world needed to alleviate the overcrowding that threatened their existence. Once determined that this planet was suitable, the leaders made their decision. They would invade, destroy the life forms ruling the planet, and colonize it.

The mission proceeded. As the capsule prepared to loose the remaining squadron of 350 ships into the waters of the ocean, a fire broke out and only a hundred or so ships managed to escape into the depths of the planet's ocean. Radar did not detect these craft because the home world had miniaturized the attacking ships. Size did not matter to the success of this mission.

Once in the water, Phase II of the operation commenced.

After some confusion, the commander was able to rally the ships into a recognizable formation and require them to adopt the disguise of small marine crustaceans that abounded in plenty in these northern waters. In looking over the remnants of the squadron, the commander found it hard to distinguish his ships from the other crustaceans that frequented the same waters. That settled, the commander began preparations for activating the Incubula. This incubula, once activated and dispersed through the atmosphere of the planet, would carry the seeds of destruction for every living being on the planet. Then, his fellow travelers from home could make the journey and colonize the planet in earnest.

As the commander began to prepare to give the activation orders, he noticed that the formation was becoming very ragged. He gave orders for the ships to align in a chevron formation.

All of a sudden, the command ship began to roll and it tumbled through a fine mesh-like affair. Then the ship and all the other ships of the squadron traveled down a long dark space. The occupants of the craft began to scream as a

powerful acid ate through the walls of each ship dissolving it. All the ships were destroyed before the incubula could be activated. The mission had failed.

The planet, that its occupants called Earth, was saved.

The two whales swam side by side. One whale let out a powerful belch.

"What's the matter?" one whale asked.

"Dunno, must have been a bad bunch of krill."

"Do you think they could have been something else?"

"If it was, it was something very similar to it."

Biographies

Peicho Kanev is the author of 4 poetry collections and two chapbooks. His collection *Bone Silence* was released in 2010 by Desperanto, NY and Уиски в тенекиена кутия (*Whiskey in a Tin Can*), 2013, Американски тетрадки (*American Notebooks*), 2010, Разходка през стените (*Walking Through Walls*), 2009 were published in Bulgaria. Peicho Kanev has won several European awards for his poetry and he's nominated for the Pushcart Award and Best of the Net. Translations of his books will be published soon in Italy, Poland and Russia. His poems have appeared in more than 900 literary magazines, such as: *Poetry Quarterly, Evergreen Review, Columbia College Literary Review, Hawaii Review, Cordite Poetry Review, Sheepshead Review, Off the Coast, The Coachella Review, Two Thirds North, Sierra Nevada Review, The Cleveland Review* and many others.

M.E. McMullen's work has appeared in numerous print and online journals and been cited for Editor's Choice, Pushcart, Hugo and Free Library Fiction among others. His regular column of classic short story reviews appears at untowardmag.com.

Brianne Kohl is a graduate of Kent State University with a B.A. in Anthropology and a Creative Writing Minor. She became a technical writer who often dreams of slipping haiku between lines of code in syntax diagrams. She currently resides in Pittsboro, North Carolina and has been continuing her education at Central Carolina Community College in the Creative Writing Program. She can be found at www.briannekohl.wordpress.com.

Travis Sharp is an Alabama native soon to expatriate to Washington state to enter the University of Washington (Bothell)'s MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics. His writing leans toward the lean, or so he likes to think; this is a representative piece. He has been previously published in *athena's web*, an undergraduate arts and sciences journal which he also created and edited, and in *Fuck Fiction*.

Dani Bordelon is pursuing a major in International Studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. She currently lives in an apartment with two close friends, hundreds of abused books, and an overactive imagination.

Ed Benjamin grew up in Alabama and North Carolina and entered the United States Air Force after graduating from college. He never flew airplanes but spent much of his 27 year Air force career supervising and training people who worked on airplanes. After he retired from the Air Force, he became a freelance proposal writer. He writes proposals to help companies and people get business with federal, state and local governments.

Ed and his wife live in the Texas Hill Country north of San Antonio, Texas in a community called Bulverde, Texas. They live in a rural area with assorted cats, raccoons, squirrels, birds and other creatures.

They have five grandchildren.

Ed is the author of "**Harry's War**", a novella about an Air Force fighter pilot who becomes involved in an air battle with Iranian fighters near the Iranian border. This ebokk is selling well wherever digital media are sold. In addition Ed is the

author of the bestselling business book, “**Cash In on the Obama \$3 Trillion Spending Plan!: How to make large amounts of money by conducting business with or receiving grants from federal, state, and local governments.**”

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in Exercise Bowler, Blinking Cursor, Theory Train, Cartier Street Press, Berg Gasse 19, Precious Metals, A Handful of Dust, The Scarlet Sound, The Adroit Journal, Perceptions Literary Magazine, Welcome to Wherever, The Corner Club Press, Death Rattle, Danse Macabre, Subliminal Interiors, Generations Literary Journal, A Narrow Fellow, Super Poetry Highway, Stream Press, Stone Telling, Popshot, Golden Sparrow Literary Review, Rem Magazine, Structo, The 22 Magazine, The Black Fox Literary Magazine, Niteblade, Tuck Magazine, Ontologica, Congruent Spaces Magazine, Pipe Dream, Decades Review, Anatomy, Lowestof Chronicle, Muddy River Poetry Review, Lady Ink Magazine, Spark Anthology, Awaken Consciousness Magazine, Vine Leaves Literary Magazine, Avalon Literary Review, Caduceus, White Masquerade Anthology and Perhaps I'm Wrong About the World. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Web and the Pushcart Prize. You can find her here: <http://carabosseslibrary.blogspot.com>

John Grey is an Australian born poet, works as financial systems analyst. Recently published in International Poetry Review, Chrysalis and the science fiction anthology, “Futuredaze” with work upcoming in Potomac Review, Sanskrit and Fox Cry Review.